EXTRAVAGANCE

March 16, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"Then Mary took a whole pint of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet,... Judas Iscariot...said, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred dollars and the money given to the poor?'"
--John 12:3-5 (TEV)

Scripture
John 12:1-8

May I pose a personal and potentially embarrassing question? Have you ever been so overcome with love that you threw your normal reserve and prudence to the wind and did something foolishly extravagant? Have you ever been so moved by passion for a cause that you opened your checkbook and gave away money you couldn't afford to give away? If you have not, it's too bad, because there is a sense in which you have not loved fully until you have been made to feel a little foolish. Which means that surely all of us have, on occasion at least, bought a dozen roses when one would have been sufficient; or written a silly love-note that still makes us blush to recall it even though it was in fifth grade; or even tried our hand at poetry; or allowed the emotion to well up in us and tears to come at the pure passionate beauty of a piece of music; or shouted "I love you God" in a night sky full of stars, or prayed it or wrote it in a diary; or even in a cocktail party conversation turning suddenly racist felt ourselves edging out over the border of the socially accepted stereotypes and heard our own voice saying a word about justice and equality and human rights of all things because of the love for God and all his children which burns deeply in your heart.

Though it may have been a very long time ago, and though it is far too embarrassing to discuss publically, I think we do know what it means to be a fool for love and thus we do know this woman who is so foolishly extravagant.

It is a fascinating and embarrassingly intimate incident. One almost wants to look the other way while it is happening. It is important enough that all four Gospel accounts include it. The scene is set for this particular incident earlier, at a high-level political conference in the Jerusalem palace of Ciaphas, the high priest, a puppet ecclisastic actually. The year is 33 A.D., springtime, near Passover. "Jesus must go" the movers and shakers decide. "Enough is enough. He comes to our city, insults us, breaks the law and seems to flaunt it, causes trouble in the Temple, worse yet the people love it. They're even saying he raised a man from the dead. He must go. Regretable, but necessary, obviously."

With that terrible dye cast the scene shifts to Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, where he is staying with his dear friends, Mary, Martha, Lazarus. It's evening, meal time, and Martha is serving. The men - Jesus, his good friend Lazarus, some disciples and other friends, are sitting on the dirt floor, cross-legged, eating supper out of a common bowl, probably dipping chunks of bread into oil. It's good and pleasant to eat together and they're laughing, I think reminiscing a bit - about the time he walked into the Temple and the look on the Pharisees' faces when he turned the tables over and the pigeons got loose and the fat salesman tripped over the lambs and fell into the next booth where the calves were. That was some day! Without a word she penetrates that clubroom and walks to where Jesus is sitting, and looks at him intensely, knowing that this festivity is prelude to tragedy, and catching him extended, dipping his bread in the olive oil, pours out on him - his head and feet - the expensive perfume in the alabaster jar she had been treasuring for years, given to her by her mother when she became a woman.

She could not have acted more inappropriately. But then she did the unthinkable. She loosed her hair publically and wiped his feet. The moment, frozen in time, is powerful. Shocking, provocative, awkward, he sat paralyzed by this peculiar honor, rich aromatic perfume running down his neck, soaking into his shirt, and she, kneeling at his feet - so foolishly extravagant, and her vulnerability is punctuated by the gasp from the other side of the circle. "What a shameful thing to do. Who does she think she is, coming in here like that? What an appalling waste!" If she had just given that to us, we could have sold it and fed a lot of hungry people."

It is grossly inappropriate to use what he said next as a position paper on poverty. "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus spent most of his time with poor people. He was one of them. He was their advocate. At least part of what is going on in the New Testament is the perennial conflict between the powerful and the powerless, the haves and the have nots, the privileged and the underprivileged. "The common people heard him gladly." Translates that "poor people, powerless people." He said what he said about them here to protect Mary, this woman, in her foolish extravagance. He even tried black comedy. Like a critically ill person who reaches out in love to reduce the awkwardness of the visitors in the hospital by joking about the funeral, Jesus tried a joke about her anointing him for burial, because the other thing people get anointed for in Israel is coronation.

It's a vulnerable feeling to have acted foolishly for love, like a three-year old bringing the prize begonia, plucked and clutched tightly in his hand to his mother as an act of love. It's hard to be the recipient of love sometimes. Jesus, the lover, loves this woman, protects and honors the woman, by ignoring all that is prudent and sensible and economically viable. "Leave her alone" he tells her detractors. In other versions of the story he says: "What she has done is beautiful. She will be remembered forever."

He may have overstated that a bit. She is, in point of fact, not one of the personalities we remember much, nor is this incident

one of the more popular stories in the tradition. I think the reason is that what she did is peculiar and unlikely and extravagant. We don't do things like that and the prudent pragmatist in each of us can hear our own voice expressing the scandal about this shameful wastfefulness. We would have said something like that.

The late Paul Tillich wrote a brief homily on this incident that is simple and exquisite. Professor Tillich wrote:

"The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear the waste of themselves... in the service of a new creation. They were justified, for they wasted all this out of the fullness of their hearts." [The New Being, pp. 47-48]

Since January 28 we have had to deal, without interuption, with the tragedy and waste of the Challenger disaster, and the loss, in full blosom, of those seven astronauts. I found Tillich's words consoling and helpful. "The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves - out of the fullness of their hearts."

Tillich went on to lament that we have neglected the "grace of wasteful self-surrender." He asked, "Are we not in danger of a religious and moral utilitaranism which asks for a reasonable purpose - the same questions as the disciples in Bethany? There is no creativity, divine or human, without the holy waste which comes out of the creative abundance of the heart."

We are inclined, I believe, to be - as Professor Tillich suggested - religious and moral utilitarians.

We are inclined to define value in terms of funcion. What is valuable is what functions efficiently, is productive, effective. One of the great debates of our civilization has to do with the value of a liberal arts education, precisely because it doesn't train people to be productive: to make things. In fact, art is not productively functional. Money spent on form could be spent on efficient function. But there is human value to beauty which transcends even the immediacies of hunger and every artist knows that, thank God. If they didn't there would be no art. If function defines value, VanGogh would not have been so shamelessly extravagant.

Money spent to keep the church beautiful in the city could be buying food. But there is a hunger assumed and addressed by beauty and our love for it that may illuminate - not replace - but illuminate and energize our commitment to deal with human need. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, of Newark, New Jersey, wrote an excellent article in the Christian Century on urban church which is very helpful. Bishop Spong observes:

"Urban life is not beautiful. Garbage collection is generally poor. Trash litters the streets. Many homes are in poor repair, and some are abandoned bits of dilapidation. Many city people are so depressed that

they deliberately fill their lives with ugliness, as an unconscious commentary on the way they feel valued by others. Consequently, it is especially important that city churches be places of beauty... Money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted, for beauty is a gift. Urban church structures need to shine as centers of beauty, as symbols of hope, as signs of the Kingdom. They need to be living parables of God's caring."

Our God is a God of justice, a God who hears the cries of the poor, who favors the underdogs, and who clearly holds us responsible for one another. The issue which will command the future and with which those of us in the First World, the privileged world, the rich world, must come to terms is the issue of economic justice and how to stop the widening gap between the rich and poor and to begin to close it. There is no issue, save nuclear proliferation, which is more fundamental to the future existence of our society, or even the world. It is a misreading of the text and a terrible misreading of the entire Biblical witness to conclude that proverty is anything but the major item on the agenda.

That having been said, may I submit that economic justice and extravagant love are not mutually exclusive? In fact, somewhere in the Good News there is an invitation to love and to be loved so much that we know what it means to be carried away, and to love so thoroughly we are willing to be foolishly extravagant.

There is a healthy tension in the Bible between a commitment to justice and an appreciation of beauty: between simplicity and extravagance. There is a more immediate tension between a Lord who said so simply one time, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," and a culture which responds: "When E. F. Hutton speaks, everybody listens." It is tension between treasures of the heart and treasures in the bank.

God's word comes in disguise sometimes. I find it regularly so in those delightful Wall Street Journal features which simply hold up for investigative inspection, a slice of contemporary American life. Some time ago an article appeared on "Yuppie Love - Detroit Auto Makers Try to Increase Sales To Young Professionals." Yuppies, "young urban professionals," are having an enormous impact on politics and commerce and are already acknowledged as our culture's next "taste makers." Yuppies are defined variously as "people who listen to National Public Radio while jogging," or typically, "a childless couple, mid-30's, who live in a condo, work hard, do aerobic exercises, canoe in the wilderness and drive a $25,000 Saab." "We are," one of them told the reporter, "very into value."

Market researchers in the steel and glass towers of Detroit now know that Yuppies and all of us influenced by that image "prefer cars that befit their new affluence, reflect their desire to be socially responsible and don't remind them of their parents." Auto makers have invested more than one billion dollars in the Yuppie cars. The Journal's moral and subtly sermonic conclusion was in this observation...

"Yuppies' fondness for gadgets has revived the turbo charger industry and given rise to the $3,000 car radio. Affixed to a turbo-charged Saab seen recently in Detroit was a bumper sticker that read, 'He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.'"

Well if we ever got around to understanding and remembering what this extravagant woman did for Jesus one time, we might be saved by a truth deeper than that bumper sticker. Jesus taught that the most love wins; that is, the most grace, and giving, and extravagance, and occasional foolishness.

The church as institution, must calculate and evaluate and allocate its precious resources. But somewhere in the grim landscape of ecclesastical stewardship schemes there ought to be an extravagant beautiful flower blooming. One of the important tasks of the church in the city is to show that everything does not have to be efficient: that some time and some space can be wasted - or used extravagantly. Somewhere in our personal stewardship we ought to be urging one another, not to increase our giving at least by the increase in the cost of living index, which is so prudent and calculated, but to give sometimes on the basis of the full hearted, extravagance of Jesus' friend, Mary. Somewhere in our exercise of responsibility for the institution there has to be a deep, emotionally authentic, passionate love. Douglas John Hall says that without it, "without deep and profound love for the world for which God offered up the only begotten Son, no amount of beating the drum for God and for money will make the least difference." [The Steward: a Biblical Symbol Come of Age, p.58]

The danger to the modern American church, I would submit, is not from irresponsible extravagance so much as the dullness and dryness that conservative prudence often becomes. Frederick Buechner suggests that: "The church is destroyed by people who are afraid to be human, brave and loving, and to take chances," and that the church lives when "for Christ's sake we are willing to look like fools: when we understand that without simplicity and passion and outlandishness no church is worth ten cents." [A Room Called Remember, p.125]

That's true about churches. And it is true about individuals. We know now that irreparable damage may be done to an infant who receives no love, who is deprived of the touch of a loving parent. One of the most tangible acts of life-giving service there is happens when volunteers from this church go to Cook County Hospital and simply hold the babies who have no one to give them the love they desparately need. We know that human beings do not do well - if they are not loved - early on. We do no better if we are deprived of the opportunity to love - later. That's an intriguing thought. I think we know it intuitively. We need to love in order to be healthy. Professor Tillich brought that into focus for me. "People are sick," he said, "not only because they have not received love, but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender, the Spirit who trespasses all reason. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength for what is useful and

reasonable." [p. 48]

We are missing something important, something integral to our humanity if we are not loving extravagantly. We are missing something glorious if we are spending our time - our lives - waiting for someone to love us, or if ours is the calculated, brokerage approach of loving only in response to love received. We're missing something important if we have forgotten how to say "I love you" to one another, to show our affection, to buy the extravagant gifts, to write poems or to make beautiful but foolish gestures. We're missing part of God's wonderful gift if our careful prudence keeps us from caring profoundly, or if our cultivated reserve keeps us from expressing the depth of love that is in our hearts.

The impulse, built into creation by a God whose very being is love, is to live thoroughly by loving, extravagantly.

This is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. It used to be called Passion Sunday. The cross on which Jesus died now looms directly ahead in clear focus. Soon there will be no turning back. Soon he will decide that the meaning of his life is to love without reservation, without cautious prudence. Soon he will decide that the only way you and I will learn to be human by loving, is to witness extravagant love giving away even life itself.

The cross of Jesus Christ is God's extravagant love. The death of Jesus is, at least, foolish extravagance. It is also an invitation to a fullness of life which is free to show love. The Gospel of Jesus Christ on Passion Sunday is an invitation to tears of joy at God's love for us, and a passion for the life of the world in God's love. It is an invitation to music and laughter and the grace on occasion to be so overwhelmed that - even we risk becoming foolishly extravagant - for the love of Christ.

The old hymn catches the extravagance...

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Praise be to you, Lord God for the extravagant gife of life, for an abundant world, for joy and laughter and the goodness of human love.

Praise be to you for the impulse to love, for the emptiness inside us when we keep our love under wraps, in the bank, unexpressed...

Praise be to you, Lord God, for your extravagance, the foolish extravagance of Jesus on the cross. Amen.